

# Education and Popular Culture

## MAIN IDEA

The mass media, movies, and spectator sports played important roles in creating the popular culture of the 1920s—a culture that many artists and writers criticized.

## WHY IT MATTERS NOW

Much of today's popular culture can trace its roots to the popular culture of the 1920s.

## Terms & Names

- Charles A. Lindbergh
- George Gershwin
- Georgia O'Keeffe
- Sinclair Lewis
- F. Scott Fitzgerald
- Edna St. Vincent Millay
- Ernest Hemingway

## One American's Story

On September 22, 1927, approximately 50 million Americans sat listening to their radios as Graham McNamee, radio's most popular announcer, breathlessly called the boxing match between the former heavyweight champ Jack Dempsey and the current titleholder, Gene Tunney.

### A PERSONAL VOICE GRAHAM MCNAMEE

“Good evening, Ladies & Gentlemen of the Radio Audience. This is a big night. Three million dollars' worth of boxing bugs are gathering around a ring at Soldiers' Field, Chicago. . . .

Here comes Jack Dempsey, climbing through the ropes . . . white flannels, long bathrobe. . . . Here comes Tunney. . . . The announcer shouting in the ring . . . trying to quiet 150,000 people. . . . Robes are off.”

—Time magazine, October 3, 1927

After punches flew for seven rounds, Tunney defeated the legendary Dempsey. So suspenseful was the brutal match that a number of radio listeners died of heart failure. The “fight of the century” was just one of a host of spectacles and events that transformed American popular culture in the 1920s.



▲ Gene Tunney, down for the “long count,” went on to defeat Jack Dempsey in their epic 1927 battle.

## Schools and the Mass Media Shape Culture

During the 1920s, developments in education and mass media had a powerful impact on the nation.

**SCHOOL ENROLLMENTS** In 1914, approximately 1 million American students attended high school. By 1926, that number had risen to nearly 4 million, an increase sparked by prosperous times and higher educational standards for industry jobs.

Prior to the 1920s, high schools had catered to college-bound students. In contrast, high schools of the 1920s began offering a broad range of courses such as vocational training for those interested in industrial jobs.



The public schools met another challenge in the 1920s—teaching the children of new immigrant families. The years before World War I had seen the largest stream of immigrants in the nation's history—close to 1 million a year. Unlike the earlier English and Irish immigrants, many of the new immigrants spoke no English. By the 1920s their children filled city classrooms. Determined teachers met the challenge and created a large pool of literate Americans. **A**

### MAIN IDEA

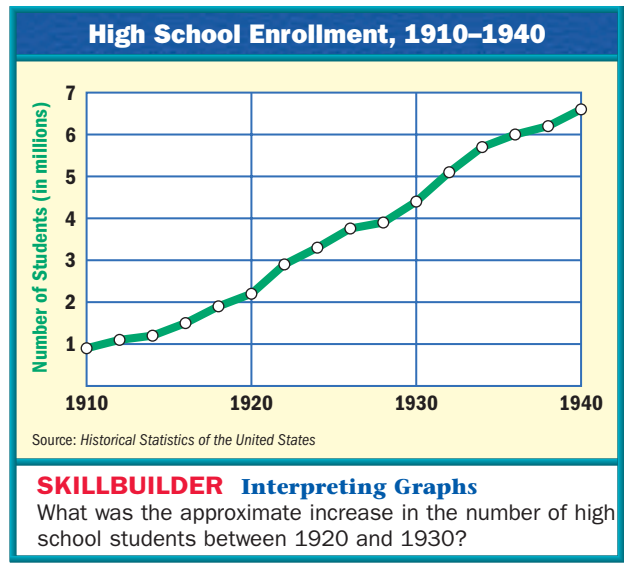
#### Summarizing

**A** How did schools change during the 1920s?

Taxes to finance the schools increased as well. School costs doubled between 1913 and 1920, then doubled again by 1926. The total cost of American education in the mid-1920s amounted to \$2.7 billion a year.

**EXPANDING NEWS COVERAGE** Widespread education increased literacy in America, but it was the growing mass media that shaped a mass culture. Newspaper circulation rose as writers and editors learned how to hook readers by imitating the sensational stories in the tabloids. By 1914, about 600 local papers had shut down and 230 had been swallowed up by huge national chains, giving readers more expansive coverage from the big cities. Mass-circulation magazines also flourished during the 1920s. Many of these magazines summarized the week's news, both foreign and domestic. By the end of the 1920s, ten American magazines—including *Reader's Digest* (founded in 1922) and *Time* (founded in 1923)—boasted a circulation of over 2 million each.

**RADIO COMES OF AGE** Although major magazines and newspapers reached big audiences, radio was the most powerful communications medium to emerge in the 1920s. Americans added terms such as “airwaves,” “radio audience,” and “tune in” to their everyday speech. By the end of the



## Radio Broadcasts of the 1920s



▲ Radio dance parties were common in the 1920s.

Prior to the 1920s, radio broadcasts were used primarily for transmitting important messages and speeches regarding World War I. After the first commercial radio station—KDKA Pittsburgh—made its debut on the airwaves in 1920, the radio industry changed forever. Listeners tuned in for news, entertainment, and advertisements.



▲ By 1930, 40 percent of U.S. households had radios, like this 1927 Cosser three-valve Melody Maker.

▲ In the 1920s, radio was a formal affair. Announcers and musicians dressed in their finest attire, even without a live audience.



decade, the radio networks had created something new in the United States—the shared national experience of hearing the news as it happened. The wider world had opened up to Americans, who could hear the voice of their president or listen to the World Series live. **B**

# MAIN IDEA

## Analyzing Effects

**B** Why did radio become so popular?

## America Chases New Heroes and Old Dreams

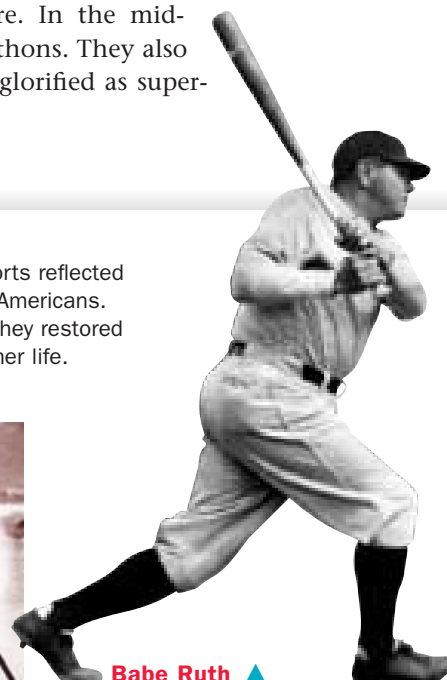
During the 1920s, many people had money and the leisure time to enjoy it. In 1929, Americans spent \$4.5 billion on entertainment, much of it on ever-changing fads. Early in the decade, Americans engaged in new leisure pastimes such as working crossword puzzles and playing mahjong, a Chinese game whose playing pieces resemble dominoes. In 1922, after explorers opened the dazzling tomb of the Egyptian pharaoh Tutankhamen, consumers mobbed stores for pharaoh-inspired accessories, jewelry, and furniture. In the mid-1920s, people turned to flagpole sitting and dance marathons. They also flooded athletic stadiums to see sports stars, who were glorified as super-heroes by the mass media.

## Sports Heroes of the 1920s

Although the media glorified sports heroes, the Golden Age of Sports reflected common aspirations. Athletes set new records, inspiring ordinary Americans. When poor, unknown athletes rose to national fame and fortune, they restored Americans' belief in the power of the individual to improve his or her life.

### Gertude Ederle ▶

In 1926, at the age of 19, Gertrude Ederle became the first woman to swim the English Channel. Here, an assistant applies heavy grease to help ward off the effects of the cold Channel waters.

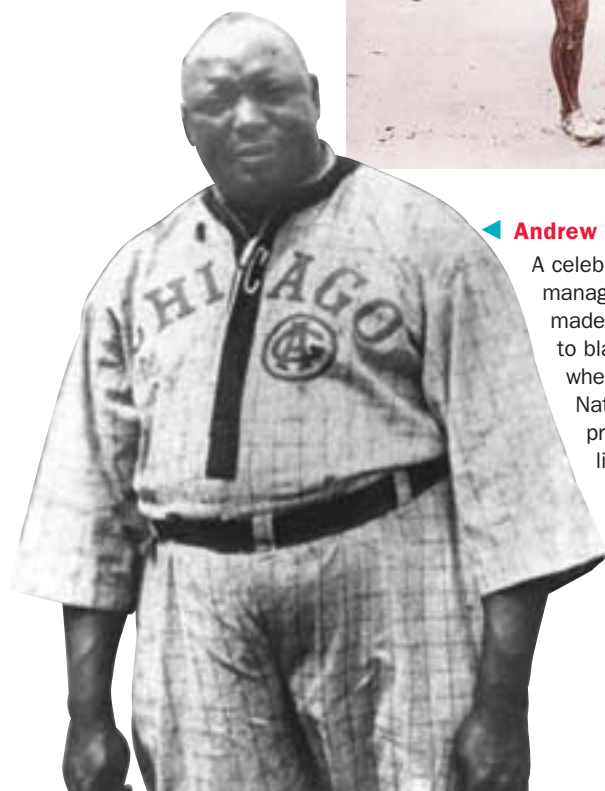


### Babe Ruth ▲

New York Yankees slugger Babe Ruth smashed home run after home run during the 1920s. When this legendary star hit a record 60 home runs in 1927, Americans went wild.

### ◀ Andrew "Rube" Foster

A celebrated pitcher and team manager, Andrew "Rube" Foster made his greatest contribution to black baseball in 1920 when he founded the Negro National League. Although previous attempts to establish a league for black players had failed, Foster led the league to success, earning him the title "The Father of Black Baseball."



### Helen Wills ▶

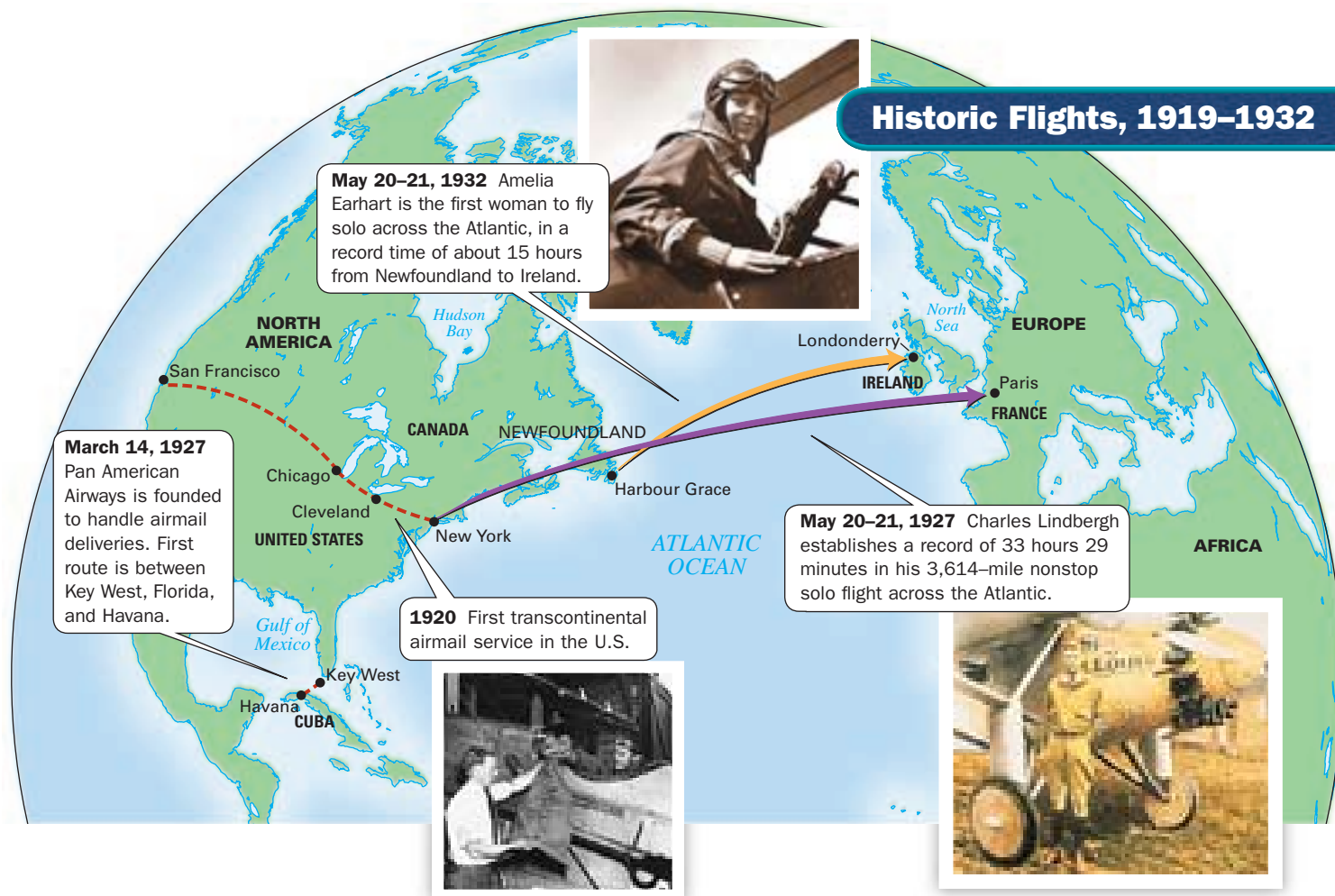
Helen Wills dominated women's tennis, winning the singles title at the U.S. Open seven times and the Wimbledon title eight times. Her nickname was "Little Miss Poker Face."







## Historic Flights, 1919–1932



**LINDBERGH'S FLIGHT** America's most beloved hero of the time wasn't an athlete but a small-town pilot named **Charles A. Lindbergh**, who made the first nonstop solo flight across the Atlantic. A handsome, modest Minnesotan, Lindbergh decided to go after a \$25,000 prize offered for the first nonstop solo transatlantic flight. On May 20, 1927, he took off near New York City in the *Spirit of St. Louis*, flew up the coast to Newfoundland, and headed over the Atlantic. The weather was so bad, Lindbergh recalled, that "the average altitude for the whole . . . second 1,000 miles of the [Atlantic] flight was less than 100 feet." After 33 hours and 29 minutes, Lindbergh set down at Le Bourget airfield outside of Paris, France, amid beacons, searchlights, and mobs of enthusiastic people.

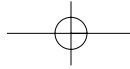
Paris threw a huge party. On his return to the U.S., New York showered Lindbergh with ticker tape, the president received him at the White House, and America made him its idol. In an age of sensationalism, excess, and crime, Lindbergh stood for the honesty and bravery the nation seemed to have lost. The novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald, a fellow Minnesotan, caught the essence of Lindbergh's fame.

### A PERSONAL VOICE F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

"In the spring of 1927, something bright and alien flashed across the sky. A young Minnesotan who seemed to have nothing to do with his generation did a heroic thing, and for a moment people set down their glasses in country clubs and speakeasies and thought of their old best dreams."

—quoted in *The Lawless Decade*

Lindbergh's accomplishment paved the way for others. In the next decade, Amelia Earhart was to undertake many brave aerial exploits, inspired by Lindbergh's example.



▲ In *Radiator Building—Night, New York* (1927), Georgia O’Keeffe showed the dark buildings of New York City thrusting into the night sky.

**ENTERTAINMENT AND THE ARTS** Despite the feats of real-life heroes, America’s thirst for entertainment in the arts and on the screen and stage seemed unquenchable in the 1920s.

Even before the introduction of sound, movies became a national pastime, offering viewers a means of escape through romance and comedy. The first major movie with sound, *The Jazz Singer*, was released in 1927. Walt Disney’s *Steamboat Willie*, the first animated film with sound, was released in 1928. By 1930, the new “talkies” had doubled movie attendance, with millions of Americans going to the movies every week. **C**

Both playwrights and composers of music broke away from the European traditions of the 1920s. Eugene O’Neill’s plays, such as *The Hairy Ape*, forced Americans to reflect upon modern isolation, confusion, and family conflict. Fame was given to concert music composer **George Gershwin** when he merged traditional elements with American jazz, thus creating a new sound that was identifiably American.

Painters appealed to Americans by recording an America of realities and dreams. Edward Hopper caught the loneliness of American life in his canvases of empty streets and solitary people, while **Georgia O’Keeffe** produced intensely colored canvases that captured the grandeur of New York.

**WRITERS OF THE 1920s** The 1920s also brought an outpouring of fresh and insightful writing, making it one of the richest eras in the country’s literary history.

**Sinclair Lewis**, the first American to win a Nobel Prize in literature, was among the era’s most outspoken critics. In his novel *Babbitt*, Lewis used the main character of George F. Babbitt to ridicule Americans for their conformity and materialism.

### ★ A PERSONAL VOICE SINCLAIR LEWIS

“A sensational event was changing from the brown suit to the gray the contents of his pockets. He was earnest about these objects. They were of eternal importance, like baseball or the Republican Party. They included a fountain pen and a silver pencil . . . which belonged in the righthand upper vest pocket. Without them he would have felt naked. On his watch-chain were a gold penknife, silver cigar-cutter, seven keys . . . and incidentally a good watch. . . . Last, he stuck in his lapel the Boosters’ Club button. With the conciseness of great art the button displayed two words: ‘Boosters—Pep!’”

—*Babbitt*

It was **F. Scott Fitzgerald** who coined the term “Jazz Age” to describe the 1920s. In *This Side of Paradise* and *The Great Gatsby*, he revealed the negative side of the period’s gaiety and freedom, portraying wealthy and attractive people leading imperiled lives in gilded surroundings. In New York City, a brilliant group of writers routinely lunched together at the Algonquin Hotel’s “Round Table.” Among the best known of them was Dorothy Parker, a short story writer, poet, and essayist. Parker was famous for her wisecracking wit, expressed in such lines as “I was the toast of two continents—Greenland and Australia.”

### MAIN IDEA

#### Making Inferences

**C** Why were Americans so delighted by movies in the 1920s?

During this rich literary era, vital developments were also taking place in African-American society. Black Americans of the 1920s began to voice pride in their heritage, and black artists and writers revealed the richness of African-American culture.

**expatriate:** a person who has taken up residence in a foreign country

Flush with money, the couple plunged into a wild social whirl and outspent their incomes. The years following were difficult. Zelda suffered from repeated mental breakdowns, and Scott's battle with alcoholism took its toll.

## The Roaring Life of the 1920s 451